

After the Happily Ever After: Ambition, the Gaze, and the Decline of Romance in Bollywood and Hollywood (1995–2016)

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Abstract

Although a generalisation, it may be possible to surmise that over the past decade, both Hollywood and Bollywood have witnessed a visible decline in the centrality of idealistic romance within mainstream cinema. Where the romantic comedies and dramas of the 1990s and early 2000s such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *You've Got Mail* and *Dil Toh Pagal Hai* framed love as enduring, fated, or emotionally transformative, many contemporary films such as *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani*, *Saiyaara* and *People We Meet On Vacation* increasingly foreground emotional withdrawal, miscommunication, irony, and the failure of love, positioning romance as secondary to individual ambition, trauma, or even spectacle. This paper demonstrates some of these shifts by analysing four films from the last decade, from Bollywood and Hollywood, to ask how and why this shift has occurred and whether it has reshaped cultural understandings of love and commitment among today's youth. It argues that the decline emerges from the convergence of four interlocking causes – psychological, digital, cultural, and economic – and draws on the work of Eva Illouz, Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman to situate this cinematic shift within broader transformations in modern intimacy. Using Laura Mulvey's theory of the cinematic male gaze as its primary critical lens, the study traces this decline across *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* (2013), *Titanic* (1997), and *La La Land* (2016), showing how the male gaze has both caused and impacted how women's bodies, desire and sexuality is represented and more importantly how they have been perceived by the audience, and then ultimately, how that has impacted their box office fate. These arguments are tested against a survey of fifty-nine young adults, whose responses reveal that romance is perceived as less emotionally impactful rather than as less common, even as young viewers continue to long for the intensity they find increasingly absent in films. The paper concludes that romance has been redefined rather than lost. It is now conditional, provisional, and subordinate to personal autonomy, with significant consequences for how a generation imagines love and commitment.

Keywords: romance, contemporary cinema, Hollywood, Bollywood, the male gaze, Laura Mulvey, individualism, youth, love and commitment, romantic disillusionment

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I. Introduction: Cinema – a noun or a verb?

Cinema has long been described as an art form, an industry, or a medium of storytelling, but maybe its most enduring power lies in the fact that it functions as a feeling. Much like love, cinema cannot be confined to a single definition; it is experienced rather than merely observed; functioning as a verb, not a noun. To watch a film is to inhabit another world, to empathise with characters unlike ourselves, and to internalise emotions that linger long after even the credits are over and stay in one's mind for weeks after. This is most clearly visible in how audiences react to romance in particular. Their inclination toward it, or even their resistance to it, registers the effect it has on them.

This emotional nature of cinema closely parallels the way love itself is understood. Love is often treated as a noun, a defined state or a label attached to a relationship. Yet many writers argue that love is more accurately a verb: an ongoing action, practised and continuously shaped through actions seen in humans' behaviour. bell hooks makes precisely this case in *All About Love*, observing that while love is “most often defined as a noun,” we “would all love better if we used it as a verb” (hooks 2000, 4). Erich Fromm had argued much the same decades earlier, insisting that love is “an activity, not a passive affect... a ‘standing in,’ not a ‘falling for’” (Fromm 1956, 22). Popular cinema occasionally dramatises exactly this idea: films such as *Qarib Qarib Singlle* and *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi* stage love as something built through deliberate, everyday effort rather than a spell that simply befalls the lovers, while a Hollywood comedy like *Notting Hill* treats affection as a series of chosen acts of vulnerability; like

steps that were needed to be taken to reach to the final stage which would be the feeling of love. Cinema, too, can be read as both noun and verb. As a noun it names a body of films or an institution; as a verb it becomes an active process of storytelling and emotional exchange between the filmmaker and audience as the filmmaker constructs a narrative, the actors embody emotion, and the audience completes the circuit by feeling and responding to this.

Before this decline can be examined, a distinction must be drawn between two terms often used interchangeably: love and romance. Love, in its broadest sense, refers to an emotional bond or attachment between people, a feeling or state that can exist independently of any particular cultural form or external burden. Romance, by contrast, is better understood as somewhat of a kind of script: a historically produced ideal about how love should look, feel, and be pursued, complete with conventions of courtship, longing, destiny, and sacrifice. As Denis de Rougemont argued in *Love in the Western World* (1983), the romantic ideal we treat as natural and timeless is in fact a cultural invention. Passionate love, he contends, was “invented” in twelfth-century Europe and elaborated through art and storytelling ever since, such that “happy love has no history” (de Rougemont 1983, 15). Cinema, perhaps more than any other modern medium, is a primary manufacturer of this script. The question of the “death” of romance, then, concerns the cultural ideal rather than the private feeling: does romance still command the place on screen that it once held?

Over the past decade, both Hollywood and Bollywood have moved romance from the centre of mainstream narrative to its margins. The shift becomes legible only when particular films are set beside one another as done in this paper. In *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), Raj follows Simran from London to Punjab and spends the entire second half of the film living inside the household of a man who has already promised her to someone else, refusing to elope even when escape is offered to him; the plot recognises no ambition beyond the couple's union and no obstacle that love is not finally expected to dissolve. Eighteen years later, *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* (2013) opens with a protagonist who announces that he wants to travel, to keep moving, and to belong to nobody. The film grants him exactly that, withholding the romance until Kabir's own project of self-discovery has run its course. Hollywood traces the same arc. *Titanic* (1997) organises a historical catastrophe around a love affair and kills its hero so that Rose may survive to carry the memory of him for eighty-four years; *La La Land* (2016) permits both of its lovers to achieve precisely the careers they set out to achieve and, in the same movement, forfeits the relationship altogether, closing on a look exchanged across a crowded room between two people who have each chosen ambition over the other. Between these pairs lies the transformation this paper sets out to describe: love stories that once depended on sincerity, vulnerability and permanence have been steadily displaced by narratives of emotional detachment, irony, fleeting intimacy and scepticism toward long-term commitment. This shift raises a question at once cultural and philosophical: is cinema merely mirroring society's evolving understanding of love, or has it actively contributed to reshaping it?

As these films are further analysed, both individually and alongside each other, there are various aspects of the film that are observed- a few similarities and a few differences that can be attributed to a plethora of causes that are further explored in the paper (economical, cultural, digital and psychological); but there has been a certain way that these films have been made- in the sense that there is a structure or a template that has been followed in films across both domains of the film industry, Hollywood and Bollywood. The later film is not merely comparable to the earlier one; it is built out of it. Six structural inheritances are worth setting out in sequence, because the argument of this chapter depends on establishing how much has been kept before identifying what has been abandoned.

First, both films are organised around a bounded interval of licensed freedom. Simran is given a month in Europe before the wedding; Naina takes a fortnight in Manali before returning to her degree. In each case the journey is explicitly framed as an interruption of duty rather than a break from it, and in each case the woman knows she is expected back.

Second, that interval is located in the mountains. *YJHD* relocates the Swiss idyll of *DDLJ* to Himachal Pradesh, and in doing so domesticates it, but the visual grammar (snow, altitude, open road, a group of young people unsupervised) is transposed intact.

Third, both heroines are introduced through fantasy rather than action. Simran sings about a lover she has not met; Naina confesses in a voiceover in the beginning of the movie that she has organised her life so tightly that she has not lived it. In both films, the woman starts out longing for something, and the man shows up as the answer to a question she has already asked.

Fourth, both heroes are defined by their refusal to follow the usual path. Raj fails his degree and gets congratulated for it; Bunny gives up a stable future for a camera and a travel plan. Both are rich enough that this refusal doesn't really cost them anything. Both films also have a father subplot. Raj has an indulgent father who pays for his adventures, and Bunny has a distant father who dies before they can make up. In both cases, this gives the hero an emotional inner life that the heroine never gets.

Fifth, both films place their emotional climax at a wedding that takes up the whole second half. In both, the wedding becomes a long musical set-piece where the friend group comes back together, the past gets worked

through again, and the heroine is shown off in ceremonial clothes. In DDLJ it is Simran's own wedding; in YJHD it is Aditi's. That shift matters, and I come back to it later, but the device itself is the same.

Sixth, and most importantly, both films give the man the job of unlocking the woman's ability to enjoy herself. Raj teaches Simran to want something she has never been allowed to want. Bunny teaches Naina to drink, to dance, to jump, to stop counting. In both films, the woman's capacity for joy is asleep, and male attention is what wakes it up. Eighteen years, changes in how the industry works, and a supposedly more modern heroine have not shifted this idea at all. Arya and Verma make exactly this point about how the later film ends: the modern elements are just a surface laid over a structure that hasn't moved, since the woman goes back to a traditional world while the man keeps his independence (Arya and Verma 2021, 314).

What Has Changed and Why It Costs the Romance

Four changes separate each older film from its newer counterpart. I look at them across both pairs at the same time. *Titanic* (dir. James Cameron, 1997) came out two years after DDLJ, and *La La Land* (dir. Damien Chazelle, 2016) came out three years after YJHD. I follow each change through to what matters most for this paper, which is less about how the films differ and more about how that difference drains their romantic power.

The obstacle moves from 'outside' the couple to 'inside' it:

In the older pair, everything keeping the lovers apart is external and social. In DDLJ, it's a father's promise, a rival groom, a code of honour and the distance between London and Punjab. In *Titanic*, it's a class barrier, an armed fiancé, a mother facing ruin, a ship divided by class and, finally, an iceberg. Neither couple ever doubts each other. In the newer pair, the outside obstacle disappears completely. Nobody stops Bunny and Naina; nobody objects to Mia and Sebastian, who are the same age, from the same class, both broke and both single. What keeps them apart is personality and a touring schedule. This does more damage than it seems to, because the Western romantic tradition has always run on obstacles rather than on fulfilment. Passion comes from whatever stands between the lovers, and a love that is allowed to settle down doesn't produce a story at all (de Rougemont 1983, 15). When the obstacle is a father, love proves itself by beating him. When the obstacle is your own preference, there is nothing to beat, only something to decide. And a decision, however hard, can't be heroic. Romance has lost the way it used to prove itself.

The ending is put off instead of chased:

DDLJ goes from Simran's confession to Raj arriving in Punjab in just a few days, and it never leaves the couple until everything is resolved. *Titanic* squeezes the whole affair into one voyage and ends it for good, in the water, with no chance of a "later." The newer films both add a gap: eight years in *YJHD*, five in *La La Land*. The lovers only come back to each other once their careers are sorted. This kind of delay kills romantic intensity for a simple reason: the urgency *was* the intensity. A love that can wait five years was never fated, and a person who is still available afterwards can, by definition, be replaced. Here, though, the two industries split in a revealing way. *YJHD* brings the couple back together; *La La Land* refuses to, giving Mia a husband and showing the union it won't allow as an openly announced fantasy montage. Hindi cinema has kept the required ending but removed what made it cost anything; Hollywood has dropped the ending and admitted the loss.

The heroine gives up her own claim:

Simran never makes demands, but she is completely willing to be fought for, and the film's happiness comes from a man fighting and a father giving in. Rose goes further than any heroine in mainstream cinema. She climbs off a lifeboat as it is being lowered and gets back onto a sinking ship rather than be separated, saying "You jump, I jump" (*Titanic* 1997). The film treats this as the ultimate proof of love. The newer heroines do the opposite. Naina tells Bunny she won't ask him to stay and won't be the thing that holds him back. Mia and Sebastian each push the other towards their career, and neither agrees to be the reason the other one stops. Both films present this refusal to ask for anything as maturity, and in a way it is. But in cinema, devotion has only ever made sense as a price being paid, and a love that asks for nothing gives no one the chance to pay it. There is one imbalance worth pointing out, though: *La La Land* splits the sacrifice between both partners, while *YJHD* puts all of it on the woman and calls that her freedom.

Marriage is pushed from the centre to the edges:

DDLJ is heading towards a wedding from its very first act. *Titanic* treats Rose's engagement as a trap, but it doesn't drop the emotional weight of marriage so much as move it somewhere else. Rose gives her name to the rescuers as Rose Dawson, and the final sequence takes her back to the Grand Staircase, where Jack meets her in front of a crowd of people applauding, staged like a wedding after death. Permanence is still the goal. In the newer films, it isn't. *YJHD* gives its wedding to Aditi, who marries a man she has known for years because it's comfortable, not because it's destiny. *La La Land* gives Mia a husband with barely any lines and no inner life,

whose only job in the story is to show that her life went on without Sebastian. In both films, marriage still exists as a social fact but has lost its romantic meaning, while the emotional weight goes to the relationship that never led to one. What this takes away is the end point that used to give love something at stake. Without an ending that binds people together, a romance becomes an episode instead of a destiny.

Put together, these four changes are really one change. Each one removes a cost. The obstacle that had to be overcome, the urgency that couldn't wait, the claim that had to be honoured and the permanence that had to be entered were all expensive, and that expense was exactly what made the love recognisable as love. The newer films are gentler, more equal and much more believable than the older ones, but they also can't create the feeling the older films created so effortlessly, because they have made love cheap to hold on to. This raises a question that is historical as well as artistic: why would two film industries, working separately and eighteen years apart, both decide to take the cost out of love?

The answer has four sides, and the next section looks at each one. Psychologically, a culture built around self-improvement has become wary of the vulnerability that costly love demands (Finkel et al. 2015, 238–39). Digitally, relationships that happen through screens and dating apps have replaced the one fated person with an endless supply of alternatives (Turkle 2011, 11; Schwartz 2004, 2; Bandinelli and Gandini 2022, 425). Culturally, commitment has been reshaped into something conditional and renewable, lasting only as long as it keeps satisfying people (Giddens 1992, 58; Bauman 2003, viii; Illouz 2021, 3). And economically, Hollywood's shift towards franchise spectacle and Bollywood's shift towards consumerist aspiration have pushed sincere love stories from the centre of the screen to its decorative edges (Halevi 2021; Bolling 2024; Jones 2026). Each of these makes expensive love harder to live, and together they explain why it has become harder to film.

The Psychological Cause: Love as an Instrument of the Self

Relationships today are expected to do things that older relationships weren't. Finkel and his colleagues describe modern marriage as an all-or-nothing institution. Once people's material and safety needs are met, they start expecting their relationship to help them express themselves and grow as people. That takes far more time and attention than most couples can give, so the best relationships have become better than ever, while the average one has got worse (Finkel et al. 2015, 238–39). If a relationship is supposed to help you become your best self, it can't be allowed to cost you much, because any cost feels like it's taking away from the very self it was meant to build up.

This is exactly where Bunny stands, and Sebastian too. It also explains why Naina refuses to ask Bunny to stay. By this logic, making a demand would be harmful rather than loving. Fromm saw this problem coming when he argued that love is an activity that needs discipline and practice, not a feeling you fall into, and that most people confuse the problem of being loved with the problem of loving (Fromm 1956, 22). The newer films treat love as something that shows up when your schedule allows it, in other words, as a result rather than a practice.

The Digital Cause: The Beloved Becomes Optional

Digital relationships make it hard to believe in the one fated person that the older films were built around. Turkle argues that networked technology lets people be in relationships while also staying protected from them, so they get connection without the exposure that connection used to involve (Turkle 2011, 11). Dating apps push this further by turning romance into a market, where people are browsed, compared and kept on hold against options they haven't seen yet (Bandinelli and Gandini 2022, 425). Schwartz's work on choice explains how this feels: having lots of options raises expectations, lowers satisfaction with whatever you pick, and makes you suspect you missed out on something better (Schwartz 2004, 2).

This connects directly to the delay discussed earlier. Simran and Jack can't be replaced; their films offer no alternative and don't even imagine one. Naina and Sebastian can be, and their films know it. Mia marries someone else, and Bunny spends eight years elsewhere without the story treating that time as a loss. A person you can come back to later is just one option among many, and the idea of fate can't survive that comparison.

The Cultural Cause: Commitment Made Contingent

The permanence that shaped DDLJ and Titanic has been turned into something conditional. Giddens describes the rise of the pure relationship, which people enter for its own sake and stay in only as long as both of them feel it gives them enough satisfaction to be worth continuing (Giddens 1992, 58). Bauman builds on this, describing bonds that are deliberately tied loosely so they can be undone without damage (Bauman 2003, viii), and Illouz argues that the freedom to leave has become a built-in feature of modern relationships rather than a sign that they have failed (Illouz 2021, 3).

A relationship that only lasts while it satisfies can't make binding demands, because avoiding demands is exactly what a conditional bond is designed to do. This explains both the heroine giving up her claim and marriage being pushed to the edges. Aditi's comfortable wedding and Mia's characterless husband aren't the

filmmakers lacking imagination. They are accurate pictures of marriage as a settled social arrangement that is no longer the goal of romantic desire.

The Economic Cause: What the Industries Will Now Finance

The last cause is the most concrete. Studio money has gathered at two extremes, franchise spectacle and prestige drama, because existing intellectual property comes with a known audience and so feels less risky to corporate investors who don't want to gamble on original material (Halevi 2021). The mid-budget romantic comedy, which used to be the main way sincere romance was made for mass audiences, has been hit the hardest. It has moved almost entirely to streaming platforms, where films are watched half-attentively and talked about briefly (Bolling 2024). The economics of this don't fully add up: romantic films still make money, and people in the industry have argued that studios should balance their franchise bets with smaller, cheaper films exactly because those films are profitable (Jones 2026).

Hindi cinema has followed a similar logic in a different way. Instead of giving up on romance, it has folded it into an aspirational spectacle of foreign locations, luxury and consumerist mobility, so the love story survives as part of a lifestyle rather than as the reason the film exists (Arya and Verma 2021, 313). In both industries, romance hasn't been banned. It has been demoted from being the purpose of a film to being one of its features.

These four causes don't work separately. A culture that expects relationships to build the self, offers endless alternatives, treats commitment as something you can take back, and funds stories to match will produce exactly the films looked at in the previous chapter: romances with no obstacles, no urgency, no demands and no permanence. Each cause strips away a different part of what love used to cost, and the films show the total. What the survey in the later part of this paper suggests is that audiences have noticed, and, more interestingly, they haven't stopped wanting the expensive version.

Reading the Decline Through the Gaze: A Mulveyan Analysis of Four Films

Mulvey's model assumes a straight, Western viewer shaped by the conventions of classical Hollywood storytelling, and feminist critics asked early on whether it could explain female viewers at all (Doane 1982, 74–88), or viewers who don't fit its assumed whiteness (hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 1992, 115–31). Mulvey herself came back to the problem six years later and admitted that a female viewer might take up the active, masculine position her original essay had kept for men (Mulvey 1981, 12–15). Applying her model to Hindi cinema isn't automatic either. The song sequence has its own history of display and works as a planned break in the story, rather than as a pause in a continuous realistic flow, and scholars treat the Hindi song-and-dance number as its own formal tradition rather than a version of the Hollywood musical number (Gopalan 2002; Gopal and Moorti 2008). These limits are acknowledged here rather than solved. This chapter uses Mulvey as a way to describe how looking is arranged on screen, not as a claim about what any particular viewer feels. This chapter uses Mulvey's theory of the male gaze even as it is aware of its limitations.

The clearest way to track the decline of idealistic romance over two decades of cinema is to focus on looking rather than plot, and to ask, like Mulvey, who looks, who is looked at, and what pleasure comes from that set-up. Romance is the genre that uses this structure most fully, because adoring looking is its main pleasure. Mulvey argues that mainstream cinema shares our scopophilia, the pleasure of looking at another person as an object, unequally. The man carries the action and the look, while the woman is styled to be displayed, marked with what Mulvey calls to-be-looked-at-ness, and offered both to the characters inside the story and to the audience outside it (Mulvey 1975, 11). Since the male character has narrative control, the viewer looks through him, and whenever the woman appears, the plot tends to pause for a moment of erotic contemplation (Mulvey 1975, 11–12). Films handle this in one of two ways: voyeuristic investigation, where the woman is uncovered, judged and then either saved or punished, or fetishistic scopophilia, where her beauty is turned into something satisfying on its own (Mulvey 1975, 13–14). Mulvey also separates three kinds of looking, by the camera, the audience and the characters, and points out that conventional cinema hides the first two behind the third to keep the illusion going (Mulvey 1975, 17).

1995 and 1997: The Gaze as Engine

DDLJ introduces its heroine as pure spectacle, even though she appears to be speaking for herself. In "*Mere Khwabon Mein*," a song that introduces the heroine, Simran dances alone in the rain, singing about a lover she hasn't met yet, and no character is there to watch her. The camera and the audience look at her without a character to look through, so her to-be-looked-at-ness is set up as something she already has before any man arrives to desire her. Her fantasy is to be seen. "*Tujhe Dekha To Ye Jaana Sanam*," a title that means *When I Saw You, I Knew*, then stops the story for several minutes of slow motion and open fields. This is fetishistic scopophilia at its clearest, where the act of looking is the love itself. The voyeuristic side runs alongside it too: Simran's father finds and reads her diary, exposing and judging her inner life, before a man saves her, exactly as Mulvey's model

predicts. Most revealingly, the film ends through a handover of the look. The platform scene is a contest between two men's right to look at Simran, and it only ends when Baldev lets her go. The happy ending is the gaze passing from father to lover.

Titanic sets up the same structure almost like a diagram. Rose poses, Jack draws, and the film cuts between his eyes and her body until looking and loving can't be told apart. Cal's way of looking works as the opposite example. It is possessive and transactional, hanging a diamond on her the way you'd dress a mannequin, which lets the film separate a good gaze from a bad one without ever questioning the imbalance itself. Two complications should be admitted here. The story is told by the woman who was looked at, so the object of the gaze still owns the story; and Jack is heavily objectified himself, which the 1975 essay doesn't account for, since Mulvey argues that the male figure can't carry the weight of sexual objectification (Mulvey 1975, 12).

In both films, though, looking causes things. Seeing leads to desire, desire leads to pursuit, and pursuit leads to the union or its tragic version. The gaze drives the plot.

2013 and 2016: The Gaze as Ornament

YJHD keeps the same machinery but changes what it powers. Naina's transformation is filmed as 'becoming visible'. The glasses come off and the clothes change, so her self-discovery is translated almost entirely as her becoming more available to be looked at. Arya and Verma point out that the wedding sequences dress her in elaborate outfits that make her sensual, and that Kabir's reaction close-ups during songs like "Badtameez Dil" direct how the audience looks at her (2021, 314). But the man no longer has a monopoly on being looked at: the same song objectifies Ranbir Kapoor just as much as Naina, so the film spreads out the looking while leaving the control with the man. The biggest change, though, is in what the looking causes, not how it's framed. In *DDLJ*, the gaze leads to the union within days; in *YJHD*, Naina is looked at, desired, and then the story erases or abandons her for the next eight years.

La La Land turns the gaze into its actual subject. It is built as a recreation of the classic Hollywood musical, so its looking is a quotation of looking. Mia's job is to be looked at, and her one big number is a long close-up where the camera's attention is indistinguishable from her career. In terms of form, the film rejects Mulvey's cutting pattern by keeping the duets in two-shots instead of splitting them into a man watching and a woman being watched. Its ending makes the argument most clearly: after holding back the union, the film shows it as an imagined montage that openly announces itself as fantasy, which is exactly the kind of foregrounding of camera and audience that Mulvey says breaks the illusion (Mulvey 1975, 17). Then the film goes back to the club, where the two share a long look across the room, and Mia leaves. The gaze is perfectly intact, and it leads to nothing.

What Has Happened to the Gaze

Between 1995 and 2016, the gaze becomes more mutual, more self-aware and less purely male. These are real improvements. But it also stops mattering. In the older films, looking created an obligation: to see was to want, to want was to act, and the plot came from that action. In the newer films, looking doesn't commit anyone to anything. Bunny looks at Naina and gets on a plane; Sebastian looks at Mia and lets her go. This is the same decline described in the previous chapter, just seen in the form of the films instead of their plots. What's left is the look of romance, in things like the song, the close-up and the held gaze, without the obligation that used to come with it.

II. Methodology

Selection of Films

The study examines four films arranged in two era-matched pairs: *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (dir. Aditya Chopra, 1995) with *Titanic* (dir. James Cameron, 1997), and *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* (dir. Ayan Mukerji, 2013) with *La La Land* (dir. Damien Chazelle, 2016). The pairing does the central comparative work. Reading one industry across time would establish only that Hindi cinema has changed; reading two industries at a single moment would establish only that they differ. By holding the historical moment constant within each pair and the industry constant across pairs, the design allows a shift visible in both Bollywood and Hollywood to be distinguished from a peculiarity of either.

Three criteria governed the selection. Each film was a major commercial success and a defining romantic text of its moment, which makes it plausible that these films shaped audience expectations as well as reflecting them. Each pair is internally comparable in form: *DDLJ* and *Titanic* are both epic-length, non-realist romances organised around social obstruction, while *YJHD* and *La La Land* are both musicals in which the lovers' own careers, rather than any external force, determine the outcome. And two of the four, *DDLJ* and *La La Land*, were independently named by survey respondents as older films whose romance they found memorable, so that the sample's romantic canon overlaps with the paper's primary material rather than being imposed on it.

Survey Design and Sample

To test whether the cinematic shifts identified above resonate with the lived perceptions of young viewers, a primary survey was conducted among adolescents and young adults. The study adopted a mixed-methods design, combining closed-ended quantitative items with open-ended qualitative prompts, in order to capture both the distribution of attitudes and the reasoning behind them. The instrument was a structured online questionnaire (Google Forms) of fourteen substantive questions plus demographic items, moving from general viewing behaviour, such as frequency and preferred genres and platforms, toward increasingly specific judgements about romance: whether romantic storylines have become less common, whether they feel weaker or less impactful than in older films, how respondents would characterise contemporary romance, what they believe is driving the change, and what kind of romance they prefer. Two open items asked respondents to name a recent film whose romance they admired and an older film whose romance felt more memorable, and a final free-text question asked each to define, in one sentence, what "good romance" in film means to them. Closed items were analysed using descriptive statistics; free-text responses were examined thematically, with recurring concepts grouped into interpretive categories.

The final sample consisted of fifty-nine valid responses. Respondents were predominantly female (71%, with 25% male and 3% preferring not to disclose) and concentrated in the target bracket, the clear majority aged between sixteen and eighteen, with a small number of older respondents. Geographically they clustered among students in Ahmedabad, a substantial proportion of them from a single school, with additional respondents from Pune, Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Kochi, and a few outside India. This was therefore a convenience sample rather than a randomised or representative one. The pronounced gender skew, geographic concentration, modest size, and self-selecting nature of online participation all mean the results should be read as indicative of a particular cohort of educated, media-literate young people rather than a statistically representative portrait of youth in general; self-reported perceptions, moreover, capture how respondents believe cinematic romance has changed, which is not identical to a measurable change in the films themselves. One further limitation follows from the film selection described above: because two of the four primary films appear in the respondents' own canon, the survey and the close reading are not fully independent tests of the same claim, and their correspondence should be read as coherence rather than as confirmation. Within these limits, the survey offers a valuable window onto how the transformation of cinematic romance is registered by the very audience whose understanding of love it is presumed to shape.

III. Findings

Viewing habits and baseline engagement with romance

The respondents were highly engaged film viewers, and overwhelmingly digital ones. Two-thirds reported watching films at least once a week, and 90% named streaming platforms as their primary mode of viewing, with only a small minority naming theatres or television. This near-total migration to streaming is itself significant, given that the economic marginalisation of theatrical romance discussed earlier has coincided with precisely this shift in where young audiences encounter film (Bolling 2024; Jones 2026). Romance was a central part of their viewing diet rather than a peripheral one: 80% selected it among genres they usually watch, second only to comedy (85%) and well ahead of thriller, drama, and action. Consistent with this, 66% said they enjoy romantic films and a further 27% do so sometimes, leaving only 7% who do not. The sample, in short, actively seeks romance out.

A central tension: less intense rather than less common

The survey's most revealing result is a divergence between two related questions. Asked whether romantic storylines have become less common, respondents were genuinely split and largely uncertain: 36% unsure, 34% no, and only 31% yes. Yet asked whether romance in films today feels weaker or less impactful than in older films, a clear majority of 56% answered yes outright and another 32% answered "sometimes," meaning 88% perceive at least some erosion of romantic intensity (Figure 1). This gap is the empirical heart of the paper's argument. Young viewers do not necessarily believe romance has disappeared; they believe the romance that remains has lost emotional force. This corresponds exactly to the finding of the film analysis, which was not that *YJHD* and *La La Land* contain less romance than *DDLJ* and *Titanic*. Both later films are, in quantity of romantic material, entirely comparable. What the later films have removed is what love used to cost. Romance has not died so much as been hollowed out: present in quantity, diminished in intensity.

This is reinforced by how respondents characterised contemporary romance. The most frequently selected descriptor by a wide margin was "more casual" (68%), followed by "less emotional" (41%); descriptors implying enrichment, such as "more complex," "more diverse," and "more realistic," were each selected by under a third. The dominant perception is of a casualisation and emotional cooling of on-screen love, the affective signature of what this paper calls the redefinition of love as conditional and provisional.

Romance transformed, not abandoned

Respondents were nonetheless clear that this is a transformation rather than an absence. Asked whether modern films avoid romance or simply portray it differently, an emphatic 86% chose "portray it differently," with only 7% selecting "avoids romance" (Figure 1). The audience itself rejects the simple "death of romance" narrative in favour of romance reconfigured, which is exactly why its effects on youth understandings of love are subtle rather than obvious.

Perceived causes map onto the four-part framework

Asked why they think romance is changing in films, respondents produced a distribution that maps remarkably well onto the four causes theorised here (Figure 2). The single most-selected explanation was "changing relationship values" (68%), a direct echo of the cultural cause and the accounts of individualism and contingent commitment advanced by Giddens (1992, 58), Bauman (2003, viii) and Illouz (2021, 3). The second was "influence of social media" (58%), corresponding to the digital cause (Turkle 2011, 11; Bandinelli and Gandini 2022, 425). "Audience preferences have changed" (53%) and "greater focus on action or content-driven plots" (46%) speak to the economic restructuring of the industry around spectacle (Halevi 2021), while "increased focus on individual character growth" (36%) reflects the psychological turn toward autonomy (Finkel et al. 2015, 238–39), which is, precisely, Bunny's position in *YJHD* and Sebastian's in *La La Land*. That young viewers, unprompted by any theoretical framework, independently nominated this exact constellation of causes lends meaningful support to the paper's analytical structure.

A gap between what they perceive and what they want

A further tension emerges between perception and preference. Although respondents characterised contemporary romance as "more casual" and "less emotional," their stated preference ran the opposite way: the most popular preferred mode was "deep and emotional" (46%), ahead of "light and fun" (29%) and "realistic and subtle" (20%), with only 5% uninterested in romance altogether. The cooling of cinematic romance does not reflect a youth audience that has stopped wanting emotional intensity; it reflects a gap between what young viewers desire and what contemporary cinema increasingly provides, an unmet appetite that complicates any assumption that the decline simply mirrors audience demand.

Cinema's perceived influence on real relationships

Finally, respondents were near-unanimous in affirming the paper's foundational premise that cinema does not merely reflect but actively shapes emotional understanding. Asked whether films influence how people view relationships, 92% answered yes, with only one respondent disagreeing. If cinematic romance is cooling, and if young audiences believe film shapes their relational expectations, then the transformation traced here carries genuine stakes for how a generation comes to understand love and commitment.

Qualitative findings: what "good romance" means to young viewers

The free-text definitions of "good romance" deepened the quantitative results, and three themes recurred with notable consistency. The first was a strong demand for authenticity over spectacle: respondents described good romance as "real and not unrealistic," "natural, good chemistry, messy / realistic," and "not forced." Several explicitly rejected manufactured intensity, one writing that good romance is "emotionally profound and authentic... without relying on unnecessary violence, gang wars, or exaggerated conflicts to prove its intensity," another insisting that "if it is an action film, romance is definitely not needed... it is just to extend the duration of the film." This corroborates the economic argument that romance has become decorative within spectacle-driven productions (Halevi 2021; Bolling 2024), and shows young viewers resisting precisely that subordination.

The second theme was a desire for emotional depth and transformation, described as "something deep, emotional and has some meaning," romance that captures "the depth, intimacy, vulnerability, and transformative power of love." Several articulated a longing for exactly the idealistic intensity this paper associates with the earlier pair: good romance, one wrote, should "feel like falling in love yourself, something that is addictive yet warm, exciting and completely unforgettable," while another defined it as a film that leaves the viewer "longing to experience such a soulful encounter." This is a description of Rose climbing off a lowered lifeboat, not of Mia leaving a jazz club.

The third theme provides a direct bridge to the film analysis. One respondent described good romance as that which "is not explicitly declared, but is portrayed through lingering looks, obsession, desire, and love... allowing emotions to emerge naturally through silence, body language, and shared experiences." This articulation of romance as something communicated through the gaze maps almost exactly onto the Mulveyan grammar examined earlier (Mulvey 1975, 11). It would be tempting to conclude that what young viewers miss is the adoring look itself, but the later films complicate that reading: *YJHD* organises its wedding numbers around Kabir's reaction close-ups (Arya and Verma 2021, 314), and *La La Land* ends on a look held across a crowded room. The

lingering look has not been withdrawn. What has gone is the obligation it once carried. It is that consequence, rather than the look, that respondents appear to be describing the absence of. At the same time, a recurring counter-theme valued romance that is "balanced," "gentle, not too intense," and "respects both the people part of it," reflecting the more egalitarian model of love the sociological literature associates with the "pure relationship" (Giddens 1992, 58).

Named films: the asymmetry of memory

A final, more impressionistic finding emerged from the two film-naming questions. Asked to name an older film with memorable romance, respondents answered readily and converged on a recognisable canon that included *Notting Hill*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, *Jab We Met*, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, *Kal Ho Naa Ho*, *La La Land*, and *(500) Days of Summer*. Asked to name a recent film whose romance they admired, responses were markedly more scattered and tentative, several respondents unable to name one at all. This exactly also helped in retelling what the paper states - the present romance movies were harder to recall, as compared to those in the past.

Two features of that list warrant more than the asymmetry alone. First, *DDLJ* appears in it, which means one of this paper's primary texts remains an active romantic reference for viewers born after its release. Second, and more surprisingly, *La La Land* and *(500) Days of Summer* also appear, and in both, the central couple does not end up together. Respondents named as memorably romantic two films whose romances fail, and filed a 2016 release under the past. This suggests that the cohort's romantic canon has quietly absorbed the non-union as a romantic form: what is now remembered as moving is the union missed rather than the union achieved. If so, the decline traced here is both a loss the audience registers and a substitution it has already partly accepted.

Figures 1 and 2, bar charts of the perception and causation items, appear below.

Figure 1. Perceptions of romance in contemporary versus older films.

Figure 1. Youth perceptions of romance in contemporary cinema (N = 59)

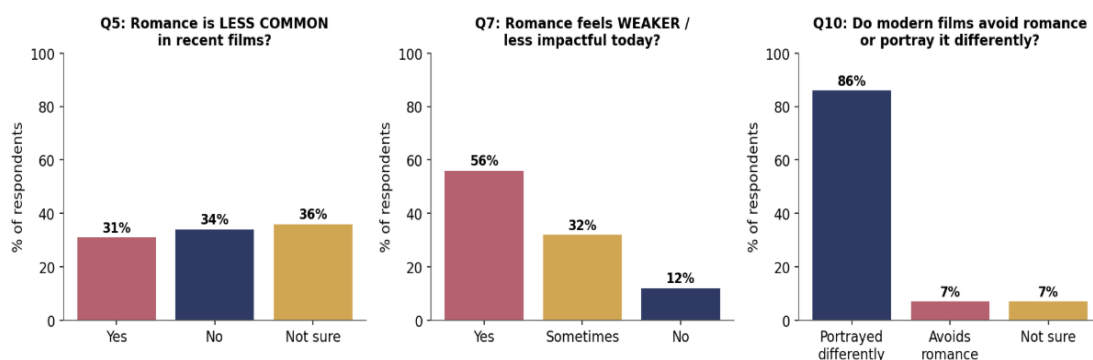
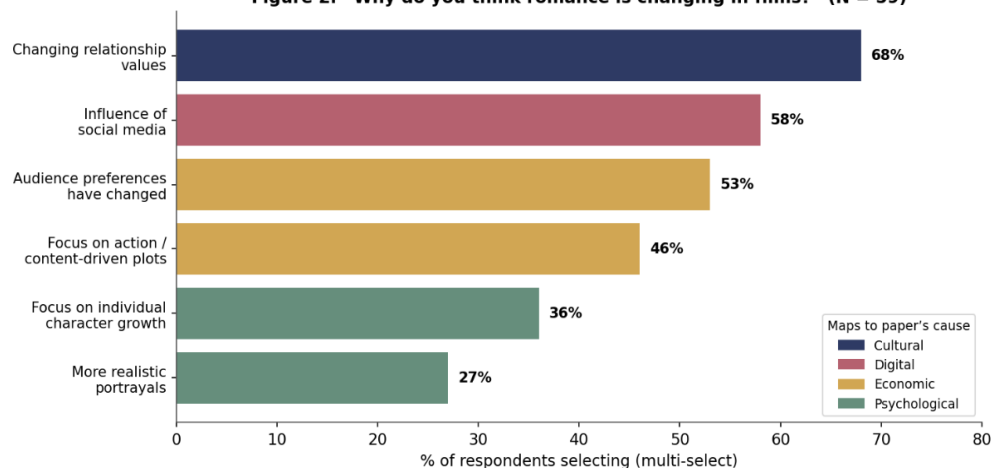


Figure 2. Respondents' perceived causes of the change in cinematic romance.

Figure 2. "Why do you think romance is changing in films?" (N = 59)



Analysis

The preceding sections established the causes of romance's decline, traced its visual signature across four films, and tested its resonance against young viewers' perceptions. This section draws those threads together around two emotional registers that define the contemporary romantic imagination: grief and emotional disconnect. These are the affective forms romance assumes, rather than incidental moods, once it can no longer be told as inevitable, and together they illuminate why the survey's respondents could report that romance is everywhere and yet feels like less.

Grief as the Structuring Emotion

The most counterintuitive feature of contemporary romantic cinema is that its dominant emotion is frequently not love but loss. Where the romance of the 1990s organised itself around the anticipation and achievement of union, much contemporary romantic storytelling organises itself around grief, whether for relationships that fail, for timing that never aligns, or for the idealistic love the genre once promised and can no longer deliver. This grief operates on two levels: within the narratives themselves, and in the audience's relationship to the genre as a whole.

Within the texts, what has changed is the function of grief rather than its presence. *Titanic* is a film built entirely inside mourning: the story is narrated by a woman of a hundred recalling three days, elicited by a salvage crew hunting a diamond, so that loss frames the romance before it begins. Yet the grief there is the price of a love that was completed. Jack dies, but nothing between them was left unattempted, and the film's closing sequence reunites the lovers beyond death. De Rougemont's account of the Western romantic myth describes precisely this compact, in which passion and death are bound to one another and the impediment that destroys the lovers is also what constitutes them as lovers (de Rougemont 1983, 15). *DDLJ* performs the same operation in a different register, moving through Baldev's nostalgia for a lost Punjab, Simran's resignation and her mother's sorrow toward a resolution that redeems all three. In the earlier pair, grief intensifies the union; it does not replace it.

The later pair inverts the arrangement. *YJHD* distributes grief through its subplots. Two fathers die, a friendship group is dispersed by eight years, and a reconciliation arrives too late. All of this leaves the central romance protected from any comparable loss, so that the couple's reunion costs nothing and mourns nothing. *La La Land* goes further and makes 'loss' the ending. Having withheld the union, it stages the life the couple did not have as a projected montage in a heightened studio idiom, then returns to the club for a final exchanged look and a departure. The last thing the audience is given is the ache of the alternative. Even the Bollywood tradition, which historically foregrounded romantic fulfilment, has long held grief at its centre: the classical theory of *rasa* names *karuna* (grief) alongside *sringara* (love) as the two emotions most central to Hindi cinema, and Arya and Verma show how contemporary films modulate constantly between these registers, deploying sorrow and longing as structuring devices rather than mere obstacles (Arya and Verma 2021, 312–14). What has changed is the balance: where older romance used grief to intensify an eventual happy resolution, contemporary romance increasingly lets grief stand as the final note.

This shift can be read sociologically. Eva Illouz describes modern intimacy as a domain of "negative relations," of relationships that fade, dissolve, and end through the exercise of the freedom to withdraw, a process she terms "unloving." Her account captures precisely a culture in which loss, rather than union, has become the characteristic experience (Illouz 2021, 3). If the defining modern romantic act is the act of leaving, then the defining modern romantic emotion is grief. Cinema, registering this, has begun to tell stories whose emotional truth lies in endings rather than beginnings.

The second kind of grief belongs to the audience, and it is harder to see. The survey shows it directly. When asked to name an older film with romance they admired, respondents answered quickly and kept naming the same handful of titles. But as they were asked the same question about a recent film, they hesitated, gave scattered answers, and several could not name one at all. That gap suggests a quiet, shared sense of loss for a kind of romance they feel is slipping away.

The written answers point the same way. Young viewers described wanting exactly the intensity they say they rarely find. A good romance, several wrote, should make one "long to experience such a soulful encounter," or "feel like falling in love yourself... addictive yet warm, exciting and completely unforgettable." These answers are phrased as wishes rather than as descriptions of anything they had actually watched, and that alone is a form of grief for an ideal they sense is fading. It matters, too, that two of the films they named as most romantic, *La La Land* and *(500) Days of Summer*, are films in which the couple does not stay together. The sadness has become part of what they find romantic in the first place.

Emotional Disconnect as Aesthetic and Condition

If grief is the emotion that fills the space left by idealistic romance, emotional disconnect is the condition that produces it. The survey's central result points to a romance formally preserved but affectively thinned. Respondents perceive romance as less impactful rather than less frequent, with 88% reporting it feels weaker or

less affecting than before. The dominant descriptors, "more casual" (68%) and "less emotional" (41%), name precisely this disconnect: a romance that occurs without fully landing.

This disconnect has roots in the very technologies and dispositions analysed earlier. Turkle diagnoses a generation that turns to technology in order to be in relationships and to be shielded from them at the same time, a relational style of managed distance that contemporary romance both reflects and rehearses (Turkle 2011, 11). A culture practised in mediated, revocable intimacy, and accustomed to an inexhaustible field of alternatives (Schwartz 2004, 2; Bandinelli and Gandini 2022, 425), may find the total, unguarded exposure of *DDLJ* and *Titanic* implausible or even uncomfortable. Finkel's suffocation model sharpens the point: as relationships are asked to serve individual self-actualisation, the older willingness to subordinate the self to the beloved gives way to a guarded, conditional posture (Finkel et al. 2015, 238–39). On screen this becomes protagonists who hold something back, such as Bunny boarding his flight or Sebastian urging Mia toward Paris, and romances that feel cooler, more negotiated, less consuming.

The aesthetic dimension returns us to Mulvey. It would be convenient to conclude that the lingering, adoring contemplation through which *DDLJ* and *Titanic* made looking synonymous with loving has simply been withdrawn from contemporary film, but the later pair does not support that reading. *YJHD* preserves the apparatus intact, organising its musical numbers around Kabir's reaction close-ups and Naina's display (Arya and Verma 2021, 314), and *La La Land* ends on a look held across a crowded room. The gaze survives. What it has lost is its consequence (Mulvey 1975, 11). In the earlier films, to see was to want and to want was to act, and the plot followed from the act; in the later films Bunny looks at Naina and boards a plane, and Sebastian looks at Mia and lets her go. This is why one respondent could locate good romance precisely in what contemporary cinema appears to withhold: emotion "portrayed through lingering looks, obsession, desire... allowing emotions to emerge naturally through silence, body language, and shared experiences." That a young viewer should define ideal romance in almost exactly Mulvey's terms, while reporting that contemporary films feel less impactful, suggests that the disconnect audiences register is bound up not with the disappearance of the gaze but with its detachment from obligation.

Synthesis: The Same Phenomenon, Two Faces

Grief and emotional disconnect are two faces of a single transformation. The retreat of the idealistic, fully-felt, visually adoring romance leaves a void; emotional disconnect is the shape of that void within the films, and grief the shape it assumes in the audience's response. Neither emotion indicates that young viewers have ceased to want intense romantic love. The survey's perception-versus-preference gap describes a cohort that finds contemporary romance casual and unemotional while overwhelmingly preferring romance that is "deep and emotional." It reveals an audience caught between an inherited longing and an altered cinematic reality. It is in this gap, between what is desired and what is provided, that the impact of romance's decline on contemporary youth must be located.

Impact and Effect: The Reshaping of Love and Commitment Among Today's Youth

If cinema functions as a verb, an active force shaping how audiences learn to feel, and not merely as a mirror of emotional life, then the cooling of on-screen romance cannot be a neutral aesthetic development. It carries consequences for the very generation whose romantic expectations are still forming. Drawing on the survey and the preceding analysis, this section argues that the decline of idealistic cinematic romance both reflects and reinforces a redefinition of love among youth: love rendered less intense, more conditional, and increasingly subordinate to the autonomous self. The claim concerns the cultural script for what love is supposed to feel like, which has been quietly rewritten. Young people have not stopped loving.

Modern Love as Less Intense

The clearest effect is a recalibration of romantic intensity. Where the cinema of the 1990s modelled love as overwhelming, fated, and self-transcending, a force worth crossing a continent for, as Raj does, or worth stepping off a lifeboat back onto a sinking ship for, contemporary cinema models it as one negotiated good among many, pursued without surrender of the self. Mia and Sebastian each push the other toward a career; Naina refuses to ask Bunny to stay. The survey suggests young viewers have internalised this lowered register even as they quietly resent it: 88% reported that romance in today's films feels weaker or less impactful, and the most common descriptor was "more casual." A generation whose primary romantic texts model casualness as the norm is being tutored, however subtly, in the expectation that love itself is a casual rather than a consuming experience.

This matters because, as 92% of respondents affirmed, films shape how people understand relationships. The dynamic is self-reinforcing: a culture grown more individualistic produces films in which romance is less central, and those films in turn normalise a less central place for romance in viewers' emotional lives. Giddens's "pure relationship" is sustained only so long as it satisfies each partner, and is governed by the reflexive question of whether it is still working. It describes the template this less intense romance both mirrors and propagates

(Giddens 1992, 58, 61–62). Love modelled as provisional teaches provisional love; Bauman's "liquid love," in which bonds are tied loosely so they can be untied quickly, names the same condition from the side of fragility (Bauman 2003, viii). When the cinematic ideal of permanence recedes, what young audiences absorb in its place is an ideal of contingency. Fromm's objection is worth recalling here: love, he argued, is an activity requiring discipline and practice rather than a feeling one falls into, and a cinema that presents it as an outcome arriving when the schedule permits teaches the opposite lesson (Fromm 1956, 22).

Commitment Reframed as Conditional

The second effect concerns commitment. Earlier romantic cinema treated commitment as the natural telos of love, figured in the wedding, the reunion, and the vow, and so presented permanence as both desirable and achievable. *DDLJ* is aimed at a wedding from its first act, and *Titanic*, though it treats Rose's engagement as a trap, relocates rather than abandons the ceremonial charge of marriage, giving her Jack's surname and staging their final meeting before an assembly of applauding onlookers. Contemporary cinema, foregrounding miscommunication, incompatibility, missed timing, and withdrawal, presents commitment instead as uncertain, fragile, and frequently unreachable. *YJHD* hands its wedding to Aditi, who marries out of comfort rather than destiny; *La La Land* gives Mia a husband with a handful of lines and no interiority, whose narrative function is simply to establish that her life proceeded without Sebastian. In both, marriage survives as a social fact while the romantic charge attaches to the relationship that produced none.

The effect on youth understanding is a reframing of commitment from an assumed destination into a conditional possibility, perpetually weighed against personal autonomy and self-development. Here the psychological and economic causes converge: Finkel's suffocation model shows how rising expectations make relationships harder to sustain even as more is demanded of them, and cinema that depicts love failing under exactly this weight ratifies the difficulty as normal (Finkel et al. 2015, 238–39); Illouz's "negative relations" describe a culture in which non-commitment has become structurally normalised, and films that dramatise withdrawal teach younger viewers to anticipate it (Illouz 2021, 3). A generation that rarely sees committed, enduring love portrayed with conviction may come to regard such love as unrealistic, not because they do not desire it, but because the cultural materials for imagining it have grown scarce.

The Gap Between Desire and Provision

Yet the survey complicates any deterministic reading, and this complication is itself among the most important effects to register. Young viewers have not simply been remade in the image of casual romance. They continue to want intensity: 46% named "deep and emotional" as their preferred form, the single most popular choice, and the free-text responses brimmed with longing for love that is "soulful," "transformative," "unforgettable," and capable of making the viewer "feel like falling in love yourself." The dominant effect of romance's decline is therefore not the extinction of romantic desire but the opening of a gap between what young audiences want and what their cinema provides.

This gap may be the most consequential effect of all, because it shapes both expectation and emotional self-understanding. Caught between an inherited longing for idealistic love and a media environment that frames such love as naïve or unrealistic, young people are positioned to experience their own desires as out of step with the times, to want intensity while half-believing that wanting it is unsophisticated. That the cohort could name *La La Land*, a film of romantic failure, among its memorable older romances suggests how far the accommodation has already gone: the longing persists, but it has begun to attach itself to the missed union rather than the achieved one. This is romantic feeling rendered uncertain of itself.

Redefinition, Not Death

Taken together, these effects support the paper's overarching conclusion that the apparent "death" of romance is more accurately a redefinition, as 86% of respondents recognised when they identified contemporary cinema as portraying romance differently rather than abandoning it. The redefinition reframes love as conditional rather than fated, provisional rather than permanent, and secondary to rather than the fulfilment of the autonomous self. For today's youth the effect is a subtle but significant reshaping of the emotional horizon: love remains desired, but its idealistic form has come to feel like a memory or an aspiration rather than a promise the culture is prepared to keep. The intensity has not disappeared from their longings; it has disappeared, increasingly, from the stories told back to them about what love is and can be.

IV. Conclusion

This paper began with a question at once philosophical and cinematic: whether cinema, like love, is best understood as a noun or a verb, a static object that reflects the world or an active process that shapes it. Having traced the decline of idealistic romance across three decades of Hollywood and Bollywood film, the answer that emerges is that cinema is unmistakably a verb. The transformation of romance on screen has not merely recorded

a change in how a generation loves; it has participated in producing it. The diminished, cooler, more conditional romance of contemporary cinema both reflects the emotional life of its audience and helps to school that audience in the disposition it depicts.

The decline, this paper has argued, is the convergence of four interlocking causes. Psychologically, a culture that prizes autonomy and self-protection has grown wary of the vulnerability idealistic love demands. Digitally, the mediation of intimacy through screens and dating applications has replaced the premise of fated, singular love with a logic of infinite, disposable choice. Culturally, the rise of individualism and the “liquid” fragility of modern bonds have dissolved the ideals of permanence and sacrifice on which older romance depended. And economically, the industrial turn toward franchise spectacle in Hollywood and consumerist aspiration in Bollywood has pushed sincere romantic storytelling from the centre of the screen to its decorative margins. Read through Mulvey, these causes share a single visual symptom: the dissolution of the adoring, fetishistic look that once made cinematic romance feel overwhelming, and its replacement by the faster, cooler, more dispersed gaze of contemporary film.

The survey of fifty-nine young viewers grounded this argument in the perceptions of the audience itself, with unexpectedly precise findings. Young people do not believe romance has vanished. Only 31% thought it less common, and 86% insisted it is portrayed differently rather than abandoned. But a decisive 88% feel it has grown weaker and less emotionally impactful. Unprompted, they nominated almost exactly the four causes the paper theorises. And, most tellingly, they revealed a gap between desire and provision: a generation that overwhelmingly still wants love that is “deep and emotional,” “soulful,” and “unforgettable,” yet finds the romance offered increasingly casual and thin. Two emotional registers define the contemporary romantic imagination. There is grief for an ideal sensed to be receding, and disconnect from a romance preserved in form but drained of intensity.

The answer to the paper’s guiding question, then, is that romance has been redefined. Love, as today’s cinema increasingly presents it, is conditional rather than fated, provisional rather than permanent, and secondary to rather than the fulfilment of the autonomous self. This redefinition is double-edged: in Mulvey’s terms it loosens a patriarchal regime of looking, and in Giddens’s it reflects a more egalitarian, reflexive model of intimacy. These are gains that should not be dismissed as mere loss. Yet the same redefinition has thinned the emotional intensity earlier romance offered, leaving a generation caught between an inherited longing for idealistic love and a culture that quietly frames such longing as naïve. This study is limited by the scale and composition of its survey and by its focus on a small set of films; future research might widen the sample, incorporate longitudinal data, or extend the comparative frame to other national cinemas. But its central finding stands. What has died is a particular cinematic ideal of love as total, fated, and worth everything, rather than love itself or even romance as such, and with it, perhaps, some measure of a generation’s confidence that such love is real, attainable, and worth holding out for. Whether that confidence can be restored may depend, in part, on whether cinema, that most powerful of emotional verbs, chooses once again to tell young audiences that it can.

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